

**Remarks**  
**Management Counselor, Eric Khant**  
**"The Story of Our Friendship: An Enduring Bond"**  
*Peace Corps Photo Exhibit Launch*  
*Melaka State Library*  
*July 12, 2012*

Yang Berbahagia Datuk Hj. Mustazah bin Osman, Deputy Chairman of the Melaka State Public Library Corporation and Mr. Mohamed Aizammuddy Bin Mohammed Idris, the Director of the Melaka State Public Library Corporation, former Peace Corps Volunteer Steve Mellema, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for honoring us with your presence this morning here at the Melaka State Public Library.

We would also like to thank our wonderful hosts here at the Melaka State Library, the home of one of our nine Lincoln Corner partnerships across Malaysia. Special thanks to Mr. Aizammuddy, Puan Nurul Huda binte Ibrahim, Ms. Hong Chia Ling and her terrific team at the Melaka State Public Library for making this program possible.

Today I want to share with you a story of friendship between our two countries. For many of you, this is a story you already know. For some of you, this is your story, unfolding over the course of a lifetime.

In 1962, the story began with a group of 36 Peace Corps Volunteers, who landed in Kuala Lumpur on a warm, humid January afternoon. They were young and idealistic American men and women, burning with energy and a will to learn and to give.

Over the next 21 years, more than a thousand joined them, making the Peace Corps program in Malaysia one of the largest in the world. Most of the volunteers served with the Ministry of Education, while others served in agricultural projects, and the ministries of Health and Social Welfare.

The Peace Corps and Malaysia grew up together. President John F. Kennedy established the Peace Corps with the first executive order of his administration in February 1961. When the first batch of American volunteers arrived in 1962, Malaysia was still known as Malaya, Sabah, and Sarawak.

The birth of Malaysia coincided with the birth of lifelong friendships between Malaysians and Americans. In thousands of communities across Malaysia, an encounter between two worlds became a meeting of minds, thoughts, ideas and connections that reached across cultural and linguistic barriers.

Our photo exhibit and Peace Corps anniversary publication – which will travel throughout Malaysia –are a collaborative effort between Malaysians and Americans to piece together the memories of these encounters. They record the sparks of understanding that had illuminated hearts and lives. A gentleman by the name of Hoon Liang Goh shared with us a most touching letter, written by Peace Corps volunteer Elizabeth Kunst, his form five teacher. She wrote:

**“As my farewell gift to you, I am enclosing two flags: one, your country’s; the other, mine. May they serve as a reminder of the days we shared and as a symbol of the exchange between Malaysia and the United States which has been the result of my sojourn here.**

**Yet, somehow I feel that I have received far more than I have given. It is my wish, also, that the flags may in future years remind you of the friendship between an American teacher and her Malaysian pupils.”**

Even though the Peace Corps program in Malaysia ended in 1983, the friendships and connections will always remain. As many of our friends here may attest, many Peace Corps Volunteers made Malaysia their home. Many more worked tirelessly to strengthen the connections between the United States and Malaysia.

We are fortunate to have with us, Steve Mellema, a former Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Kelantan between 1972 to 1976, and was a Fulbright Scholar at Universiti Sains Malaysia between 2002 and 2003. He is a professor of physics at Gustavus College. He is back in Malaysia with his wife Shirley, a native Penangite, and fellow faculty members to plan for collaboration between Gustavus and Universiti Sains Malaysia. Both Steve and Shirley served as trainers for incoming Peace Corps Volunteers here in Melaka and oversaw the rigorous

training and orientation process for hundreds of Peace Corps Volunteers. In a short while, you will have the opportunity to hear Steve's Peace Corps stories first hand!

Friends of Malaysia, an association of returned Peace Corps Volunteers, is also active in both Malaysia and the United States, contributing in myriad ways to U.S.-Malaysia understanding and fostering community service projects all across Malaysia.

It is perhaps fitting that this year, on the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Peace Corps in Malaysia, the spirit of Peace Corps lives on in 2012 with a group of 50 Fulbright English Teaching Assistants. Like their Peace Corps predecessors 50 years ago, they landed in Kuala Lumpur on a warm, humid January afternoon. They fanned out to settle into communities across the states of Terengganu, Pahang, and Johor.

These young men and women are walking the path of the Peace Corps Volunteers and establishing new bonds of friendship and mutual respect with their Malaysian students, mentors, and friends.

I would like to acknowledge Ms. Yinshi Lerman-Tan, who is with us today along with her colleagues, Nurul Aminah M Kepli and Ahmad Zamri Kemat, both from SK Kesang school in Muar, Johor. Yinshi – please stand up so we can recognize you in the audience. Yinshi is one of our 50 English Teaching Assistants, and she has made a tremendous effort to bring her students from Muar to attend our Peace Corps Exhibit Launch.

Speaking more generally, it is wonderful to be able to say that our people-to-people connections between Malaysia and the United States are more vibrant than ever. Of course, Melaka hosts a concentration of American companies which have contributed much in this area, and are doing so more than ever today. And we are delighted that Melakans continue to seek out the United States as a place to study.

But I am also proud that we are building ties in other areas. For example, just a few weeks ago, President Obama's sister, Dr. Maya Sotero-Ng launched their mother's batik collection at the Islamic Arts Museum in Kuala Lumpur, drawing hundreds of ethnographers, batik

artists, and students of art. Currently, American and Malaysian dancers, musicians, and photographers are fusing their artistic energies together at the George Town Festival. Our speakers of different backgrounds bring expertise in U.S. elections, world history, library science, and English language education to Malaysian audiences through venues such as Lincoln Corner Melaka. Looking ahead, there will be many more Malaysian and American collaborations and encounters to come.

Let me end by sharing with you a poem by Bob Wolpert, a former Peace Corps Volunteer who served in Kulai, Johor:

Along the road, I  
have met many,  
though not all,  
and I have walked with them,  
sharing joy and sorrow,  
living and dying,  
the long night and burning day of human living.  
And they have known me.  
This was a community.  
And the sharing helped illuminate the  
darkness, though not all of it.  
I am still a solitary man.  
But I have not been alone.

Thank you Malaysia.  
You will not be forgotten.

I echo Bob's sentiments. I believe in the enduring bond between our two countries, and this is a story that will continue to be written for generations and generations to come.

Thank you for listening and thank you again for honoring us with your presence today.